



As the global vaccine roll-out gathers pace, organizations find themselves at an inflection point. After one year of managing on the fly, the big questions occupying the leadership agenda right now is *when, how* - and indeed *whether* - to bring people back to the office. Clients are also grappling with what to do about employees who refuse to be vaccinated, and if remote work *is* here to stay, what are the long-term effects on productivity and employee well-being. Will it help or hinder inclusivity? And how might it change the character of the C-Suite?

These were some of the questions put to a virtual panel of senior global executive search experts in a recent CHRO Webinar [link here] hosted by AltoPartners. While there is no blueprint for dealing with an unprecedented and ongoing crisis, very clear trends are emerging in terms of who is handling the crisis better. Spoiler alert: it hinges on a very particular set of leadership skills that are generally at odds with traditional command and control structures.

### **High levels of stress and burn-out**

Little wonder then that we are seeing high numbers of executives and managers at breaking point, reflecting the disconnect between what should be happening at leadership level and what we know to be happening, observes Albert Froom, a founding member of AltoPartners and the managing partner of Leaders Trust/AltoPartners The Netherlands.

For managers and leaders accustomed to running a tight ship based on centralized decision-making, the past 12 months have been a period of profound adjustment. For many of these leaders, the prospect of people returning to offices cannot come quickly enough. For these managers, the bad news is that this is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Even assuming we could achieve 100% vaccination rates, companies are also experiencing pushback from employees who have adapted to remote work and no longer see the need to endure an expensive daily commute for the sake of putting in a physical appearance. This is putting pressure on companies to permanently restructure the working environment if only to retain top talent. Equally, the allure of fewer square meters of office space to heat and cool is driving many organizations to review their remote working policies in the hope of reducing overheads and carbon footprints. In addition to the clear advantages to employees and the environment, remote work policies also have the potential to boost diversity and inclusion, given that organizations are no longer bound by geographical limitations. While some companies have already declared their intention to switch to remote working permanently, others are taking a more cautious approach on the back of concerns about the long-term impact on employee engagement and productivity, and are considering a hybrid model that acknowledges that employees are social beings who may benefit from coming together from time to time, while also being allowed the freedom to choose where they work.



## **Agility – the new super power**

For organizations looking to make remote work a more permanent feature, Froom advises clients to double down on agility principles and embed them in their DNA.

“Remote work in some form or other is here to stay and organizations need to equip managers with the skills to cope. The only way to succeed in this environment is to put all your energy into building team work, alignment and autonomy, which are cornerstones of an agile organization.

“Letting go of a command-control culture is a complex thing. Often leaders need to unlearn the very processes and practices that led to their success - and probably that of the company - in the first instance. This is a very difficult thing to do and behavioral change on this scale requires professional help: get a coach – and let your people know you’re getting a coach,” advises Froom, stressing that transparency is an essential value in the post Covid world.

These new behaviors also need to be embedded in your selection process, which means that unlike the pre-covid world, we need to stop looking for people who fit culturally and rather look at attracting people who can add to the culture and help mold your changing corporate culture.

“In my mind, inclusion is more important than finding a cultural fit especially if the culture is toxic and no longer fit for purpose. The great thing about inclusion is that you can continue to build and benefit from it.”

## **Wanted: leaders who listen**

Judy Boreham, co-leader of the human resources practice for Diversified Search / AltoPartners USA, agrees. “A new way of working favors a new leadership style. The world is still in crisis mode. Vaccines are coming, but they’re not coming fast enough and the leadership changes that we’ve seen [over the past 12 months] are going to continue to evolve.

“Initially, people tended to be optimistic, mirroring the official political stance in the US that it was going to be a short-lived phenomenon. The upshot was that many people treated it as a sabbatical - a brief but not entirely unwelcome break from business as usual. It very quickly became apparent that we were all going to have to think a lot longer term and that this was a crisis unlike any we had ever faced before. Leaders needed to show strength, stability and a game plan, but most of all they needed to be adaptive.”

Overnight, leaders had to pivot to become much more available and visible and, in many cases, this meant learning new tech platforms and new ways of engaging. Those managers who understood the difficulties employees faced when juggling workload with the need to oversee home schooling and



noisy pets, handled it better than managers who tried to ignore the fact that their employees were becoming stressed by divided responsibilities.

Says Boreham: “Then came the recovery phase when organizations began to focus on ways to maintain employee engagement and connection. And in this respect, HR has really come into its own – HR Leadership has done an incredible job of helping employees and managers to stay connected and to remind organizations that they had to turn up the empathy dial and ramp up communication.

“Those businesses that survived the pandemic are now entering the Thrive Phase, where they are looking at life after Covid and making decisions that will shape what McKinsey recently termed the [‘Next Normal’] (<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/leadership/the-next-normal-arrives-trends-that-will-define-2021-and-beyond#>). As much as companies are champing at the bit to get back to the office, there is a growing realization that we may never go back in quite the same way again. Market shapers are emerging with new businesses that will always work remotely and leaders need to be open to new ways of managing in a hybrid structure. This means understanding the social impact of your decisions too. Generation Z – in particular – is all about community and in our experience, working remotely is much harder for this group. All of these factors have leadership implications and require EQ to match IQ. This means more open-minded, thoughtful leadership from people who are flexible and able to communicate and convey complex messages of hope and appreciation even when they can’t be present in person. Anyone wedded to traditional ways of doing things is going to struggle with this.

“To succeed in a post-COVID world, leaders need to be willing to listen and to change their perspective if necessary. What we did last week might not work next week. Adjustability and flexibility are the new survival tools.”

### **Context is everything**

Sonal Agrawal, global chair of AltoPartners and head of the Accord Group/ AltoPartners India, agrees that while the hybrid model is here to stay, the cultural reality of remote work is different from place to place.

“The concept of work and the position it occupies in your life is quite different in most parts of Asia compared to large parts of the West. Asian cultures tend to be more community driven, which has implications for how employees experience lockdown personally and professionally. Additionally, the concept of social distancing and physical infrastructure at home is quite different from what it is in the West. In India, people typically have smaller homes occupied by extended families and tend to have hybrid models of childcare with few making use of day-care, for example. So, the issues that people face in terms of isolation in the West, are inverted – it is difficult to get space and privacy to work. In big American and European cities, 30-somethings are sitting alone in bedsits, while their counterparts



in Mumbai are like, 'Get me out of the house because I can't handle all these people running around all the time'."

A further complicating factor is the integration of two cultures, especially given the preponderance of multi-national companies operating in Asia. Employees of a Dutch company operating in Mumbai, for example, will need to integrate with the head office culture, as well as their local office culture. In these situations, coming to work is about creating opportunities to gel and understand cultural nuances, values, ethics and the way things are done.

This is not to say that there aren't certain kinds of jobs and segments of industries that lend themselves to sitting in Bali and working in Europe, but Agrawal believes this will not be the absolute norm.

There is very little substitute for being able to look around a room and gauge employee mood and morale, she says. "Remote work creates barriers. In the office, for example, I can see when a researcher is battling and I can go over and help unstick the log jam. That same person working from home would have to schedule a zoom meeting with my PA and they may hesitate to do so. And while I agree that remote working opens up great opportunities for inclusivity, the flip side to that coin is that it also renders a lot of people completely invisible. We need to be checking in with these employees and making sure that they are on-track, engaged, and that they are not ill or at risk in their home environment. Ultimately though, leaders have to embrace change, and work towards a hybrid model that works for their situation. It's not a linear process, and companies will have to find their own way. What is certain is that leaders will have to structure and plan for communication, both formally and informally, in a way that they have never had to do before.

"After all, it would be a shame to go through all of this and then end up returning to exactly the same place as before. Opportunities to radically rethink the way we work come along very rarely – best we embrace it."

**The post-Covid checklist for optimum organizational health, courtesy of Corinne Klajda, Managing Partner of Accord Group Polska/ AltoPartners East and Central Europe:**

1. **Disruption is the new normal – embrace it.** Like it or not, hybrid models are good for people and good for the planet. Offices will evolve into places to connect, rather than to work. Companies who successfully foster high levels of trust, autonomy and team work will emerge as market leaders.
2. **Review your hiring process** – Be prepared to make more use of assessment tools across the organization to ensure that values accompany skillsets. Broadening your talent pool by looking at people outside of your immediate community and culture is a great way to boost diversity and inclusivity but make sure you aren't held back by rigid, old-school values, such as the need



to meet a candidate before signing them up. Adhering to pre-Covid conventions places you at risk of losing out to a more progressive competitor.

3. **Do an agility check** – Critically assess your decision-making pathways. If they hinder autonomy, team work or agility, they need to be reconfigured.
4. **Coach leaders on how to act and communicate** – Empathy and listening-skills are key to mobilizing and inspiring teams to act autonomously. These can - and must - be taught to managers at all levels. Pay particular attention to newly promoted managers.
5. **Hire for EQ** – In your selection process, focus more on behavior than experience, and use the opportunity to hire and promote people that will model the values you are looking to entrench.
6. **Look after your key people** –The ability to work from anywhere in the world means that talented employees no longer have to uproot and relocate their families in search of a better paying, more agreeable work environment. You may also need to make changes to compensation packages to accommodate cross border taxation systems.
7. **Balance employee needs with company and customer needs....** back-to-back video calls are demanding and exhausting. Help employees to feel in control of their working environment by respecting work/life boundaries and encouraging them to maintain balance. Employees who are treated as ‘always on’ are more likely to feel disengaged and suffer from burn out.
8. **Context is key** – What works for the Philadelphia office may not work in Mumbai or Johannesburg. Not everyone is equipped to work remotely.
9. **Schedule and plan for informal and formal communication and consultation** – Leaders need to be more visible than ever and model the behavior they want to see – this includes empathy and listening skills.
10. **Maintain a spin-free zone** – A recent [report from MIT Sloan Management](#), which sifted through 1.4 million employee reviews on Glassdoor, showed that the ability of the top team to communicate with honesty, transparency and integrity were key to ensuring positive perceptions of organisational culture. Companies looking to gain a competitive edge may want to consider including transparent communication as an official corporate value. In an earlier study conducted by MIT, out of 500 corporate value statements, only 12% listed transparency or communication among their official corporate values.
11. **Take regular temperature checks** – If you haven't yet commissioned an employee survey, this is probably a good time to ask hard questions about employee perceptions of your leadership team’s communication styles, and the degree to which your organisation fosters strong working relationships and builds trust.
12. **Look out for the marginalized and invisible** – Paying attention to employee welfare is the best way to build employee engagement and trust during a crisis. Companies that combined honest communication with policies that addressed staff welfare – specifically those that helped



people balance work with family responsibilities, protected employees' physical health and safety, and supported their mental well-being – came out on top in the MIT Culture survey. Employees felt particularly warm and connected to companies that had shown a willingness to be responsive, flexible, agile and adaptive to environmental issues during the crisis.

*With thanks to all our clients who participated and shared their views and to our moderator, Corinne Klajda, Managing Partner of Accord Group Polska, and to our panelists, Sonal Agrawal, global chair of AltoPartners and Managing Partner of Accord India; Albert Froom, a founding member of AltoPartners and Managing Partner of Leaders Trust / AltoPartners The Netherlands; and Judy Boreham, Managing Director and Co-Chair of the Human Resources Practice of Diversified Search Group / AltoPartners USA.*